Hybrid Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Premodern Japanese History

《研究動向》

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Abstract

In the United States, one commonality among recent historiography on premodern Japanese history is a tendency toward interdisciplinary methodologies. The past generation of scholars of premodern Japan was heavily influenced by the work of John Hall and his protégé, Jeffrey Mass. Their emphasis was on documentary materials such as court edicts, letters, or records of land and other disputes, and departed from the previous tendency to rely heavily on literary sources for historical information. Through close analysis of those documents, Hall, Mass, and their students were able to rewrite much of what is known about premodern Japanese history in the West, drawing on the actual words of the courtiers, warriors, and cultivators who lived through the events they recorded.

While recognizing Hall and Mass' contribution to American scholarship on Japan, following their example still leaves lacunae in our knowledge about premodern Japan. How do we learn about the lives of those who did not have the luxury or ability to put brush to paper? Many people did not or could not leave written records themselves. Relying solely on historical documents sheds little light on their lives.

Recognition of this gap in our historical knowledge has led to a more interdisciplinary approach to Japanese history, revealing more about those who left no written records behind. In recent years, young scholars have begun to rely on comparisons of various sources, including literary texts, material culture, and artwork, with written documents. The incorporation of different types of sources leads to a more nuanced picture of premodern Japan, allowing us to access information about those who may not have recorded their own history. Below, I will introduce my own research on the Seto Inland Sea, focusing in particular on how geospatial analysis of written and archaeological evidence has helped shed light on maritime trade and seafaring practices in medieval Japan.

Historical Geospatial Analysis

The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is slowly changing how we can interpret the past. This software is a powerful mapping tool that allows various sets of information to be overlaid on a single map and queried to highlight patterns of development, trade, and interactions among different people and areas. Using this type of geospatial analysis to study historical events can often provide new insight into the relationships between the agents involved in those actions, even if other corroborating evidence has been lost to time or was never recorded at all. Historians–particularly of the premodern era – have only just begun to use this tool to study the past.

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I used GIS to explore lateral connections among different locations within the medieval Seto Inland Sea. The *Register of Incoming Ships at the Hyōgo North Gate* (*Hyōgo Kitaseki irifune nōchō*; below, *Register*), which recorded nearly two thousand ships that passed through the Hyōgo north gate in 1445, has been an important source for Japanese scholars studying medieval maritime shipping. The *Register* records the ships' port of registry, the types and volumes of cargo they carried, tolls collected on the cargo, and the names of the ships' captains and associated warehouse managers. Most studies have used this information to shed light on shipping from the peripheries through Hyōgo, likely destined for marketplaces in Kyoto. The names of the captains have largely been overlooked, as they are quite common and few if any other documents record their existence. I was interested in trying to determine whether there were additional ties among the ports of origin, not simply the one-way relationship from the peripheries to the center. I therefore created a database that allowed me to map information from the *Register* as well as additional layers of information from the archaeological record using GIS software. Larger ports such as Onomichi or Setoda appear often in the written record, and their important role in shipping has long been recognized. When analyzing the *Register* and archaeological data through a geospatial lens, I was able to identify certain smaller ports, often forgotten in the written record, that seemed to take on a larger role in transshipment (MAP 1).

Tracing the flow of goods such as salt, rice, and cloth helps highlight the role that Takasaki and Kamagari played in shipping. These two ports were located slightly west of an island chain known for its swift currents and pirate lairs. Neither location shipped great quantities of goods to Hyōgo, but the items they did send were likely produced in Kyushu and other western ports. Ships' captains from those areas brought their goods to Takasaki and Kamagari and transshipped them there, deferring to the local captains who could better navigate the challenging waters. Without the twofold process of highlighting the trade routes on the map and assessing the proximity of Takasaki and Kamagari to the more treacherous smaller islands, it would have been more difficult to understand why these locations, largely forgotten in the written record, acted as transshipment points.

We have very little written documentation describing the men who sailed trading vessels in the medieval period. Through studying the movements of the ships' captains in conjunction with their geographic affiliations, I discovered that there was a strong trend of collaboration among captains. By using GIS to display on maps the locations affiliated with the captains that arrived in Hyōgo on the same days, it became clear that certain regions had different types of networks. In the eastern Inland Sea region, individual captains had stronger networks with other individuals from nearby ports, indicated by the same names appearing together on the same day in Hyōgo. The map denoting Hyōe Tarō's voyages is one example of this (MAP 2). This single man commanded ships from Mihara and Matsue, and was listed as secondary captain on a vessel from Ushimado. Regardless of which port he departed from, however, he was inevitably accompanied by a handful of the same men hailing from nearby ports (TABLE 1). In the western Inland Sea, on the other hand, networks seemed to be port-centered: several captains from the same port would often sail together,

Table 1 List of Hyōe Tarō ships and ports of registry with accompanying captains and their affiliate ports.

Province	Port Name	# of Hyōe Tarō Boats	Accompanying Captain	Port Affiliation (s), Province	# of Accompanying Voyages
Harima	Matsue	9	Emon Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	1
			Emon Tarō	Hibi (Bizen)	1
			Gorō Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	3
			Mata Gorō	Mihara (Awaji)	2
			Kanimori Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	3
			Taifu Jirō	Mihara (Awaji)	1
Awaji	Mihara	8	Emon Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	6
			Gorō Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	3
			Mata Gorō	Mihara (Awaji)	2
			Kanimori Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	1
			Kanimori Tarō	Yura (Awaji)	1
			Taifu Jirō	Mihara (Awaji)	1
			Emon Jirō	Murotsu (Awaji)	3
			Hyōe Jirō	Matsue (Harima)	2
Bizen	Ushimado	3	Gorō Tarō	Mihara (Awaji)	1
			Emon Jirō	Murotsu (Awaji)	1
			Hyōe Jirō	Matsue (Harima)	2

but not always with the same individuals.

Finally, I was also able to incorporate evidence from the archaeological record into the GIS database. This allowed me to compare the information written in the *Register* with items actually found at various coastal and underwater sites (MAP 3). Bizen pottery, for example, is listed in the written record as only being shipped from four sites to Hyōgo. Yet if we incorporate the archaeological record, we see a much more complex picture. Bizen pottery alone has been recovered from sites throughout the Inland Sea region, suggesting that there was an active direct trade from Bizen to locations throughout the area. Overlaying this information on the maps emphasizes the range of the Bizen pottery trade.

GIS, then, is a means to an end. By representing data from written records and archaeological evidence visually on a map, it became easier to identify these patterns. It also allows a researcher to overlay different sets of data to compare various types of information. Continuing to apply these techniques can help us learn more about the development of trade and other exchanges in premodern Japan.

Interdisciplinarity: Its Challenges and Potential

The propensity to use various sources to study premodern Japan is becoming more common. Literary texts are enjoying a resurgence in historical analysis, as scholars compare their accounts with evidence from historical sources to assess accuracy. Other scholars use artwork as historical evidence, analyzing artistic depictions of events to supplement our knowledge of written records. In my own research, I have used the tool of GIS to help process data from both written and archaeological evidence. This has allowed me to incorporate people as well as commodities into my analysis of trade patterns, reinforcing the idea of a complex Inland Sea network.

Interdisciplinarity, however, is not without its challenges. Breaking down disciplinary barriers requires a scholar to have more than a passing familiarity with multiple fields. This can be a time- and labor-intensive endeavor. To effectively use GIS to analyze data entails creating a comprehensive database, not to mention learning how to use the software to process that database effectively. One of the biggest potential pitfalls of using GIS is the temptation to focus on creating visually appealing maps, rather than performing a detailed analysis of what the data on those maps actually represents. While the end results of these interdisciplinary studies certainly provide fascinating new insights into premodern Japanese history, the initial investment of time and labor is considerable.

Furthermore, young scholars who focus on interdisciplinary analyses risk being seen as not part of a distinct field. They may be told that they are studying "too much literature/archaeology/sociology for a historical study" (and vice-versa). While a wider disciplinary base may appeal to various audiences simultaneously, there is a danger of appearing to be a dilettante. Again, we must be careful to articulate how our studies are equally relevant to multiple academic fields, or alternatively how inspiration from other disciplines can advance specifically the study of history.

Incorporating additional methodologies and using different tools into our studies to analyze that data will continue to help shed light on premodern Japanese history, as we explore aspects of early Japanese life that cannot be easily recaptured through a single source.

Works Referenced

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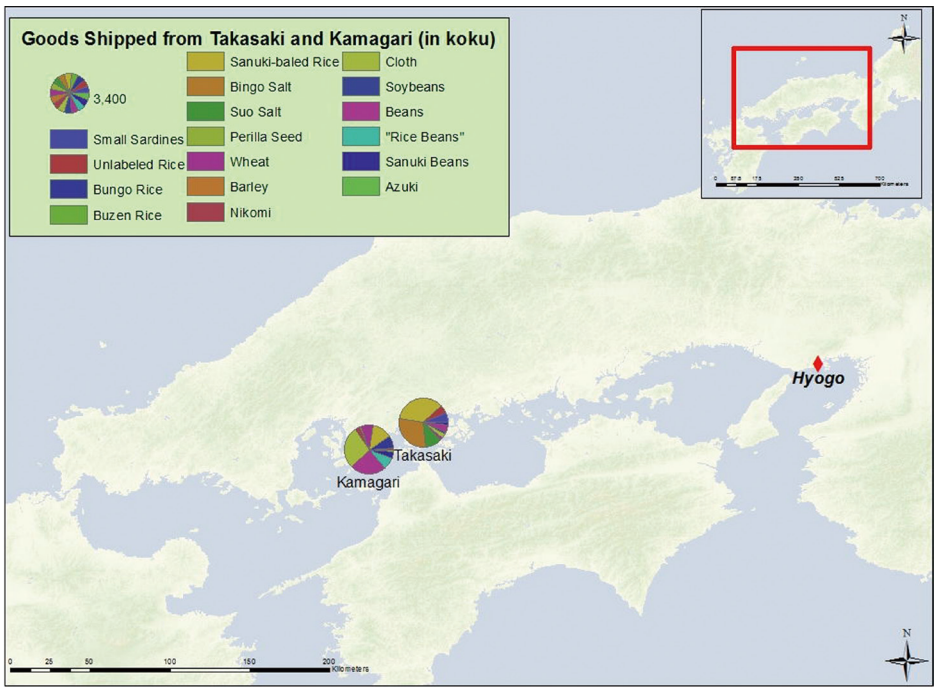
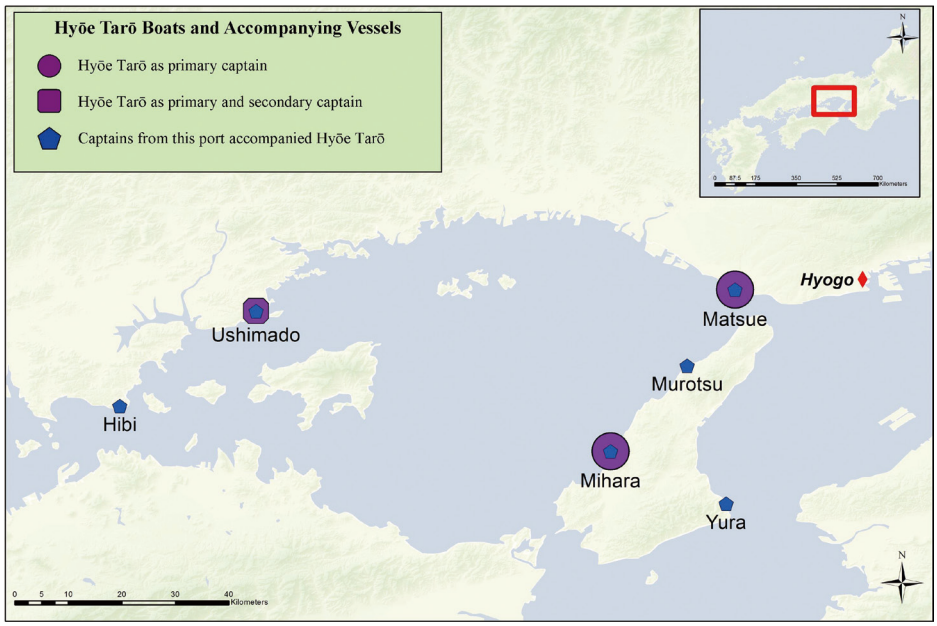
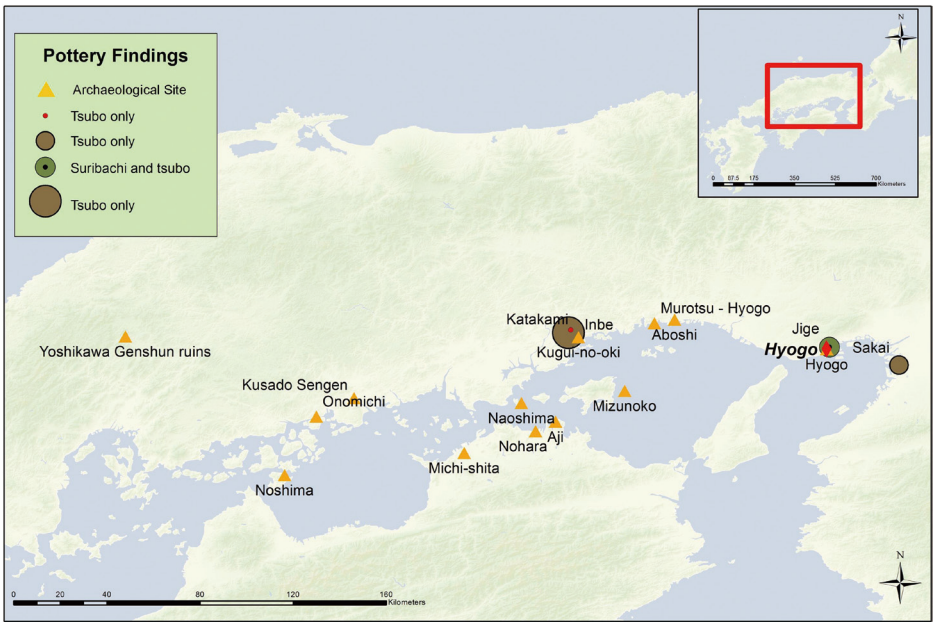


Map 1　All Goods Shipped from Kamagari and Takasaki to Hyogo



Map 2　Ports affiliated with Hyōe Tarō and his extended network



Map 3 Bizen pottery in the Records and in archaeological evidence